

Address by the Rt. Hon. W.L. Mackenzie King, Prime Minister
to the newly admitted Barristers-at-Law
at a
Meeting of Benchers of The Law Society of Upper Canada in Convocation
Osgoode Hall, Toronto, September 18, 1947

It is, I understand, one of the time-honoured customs of the Law Society of Upper Canada that, when students have finished their courses, and have been called to the Bar, they are addressed by the Treasurer, who out of experience gained through years of practice gives to them some words of "advice and admonition". These are the Treasurer's words, not mine. I have been asked by the Treasurer if I would assume that duty on this occasion.

You, gentlemen, will not be surprised that, having, like yourselves, only just been admitted to the Bar, I should have greatly hesitated before assuming so grave a responsibility. The Treasurer, however, mentioned two circumstances which caused me to accept his courteous request. He said there would be disappointment if I did not speak; and added, that as the time was limited, my remarks would necessarily have to be brief.

Invitation of Benchers - Gray's Inn and Osgoode Hall

But I have, also a confession to make which may help to excuse my venturing, however briefly, to address a gathering of Barristers, when I myself am without any experience whatever at the Bar.

The letter I received from the Treasurer in June last, advising me that a resolution had been passed at a meeting of the Benchers of the Law Society of Upper Canada, inviting me to become an Honorary Bencher of the Society, mentioned that honour only. The letter said nothing whatever about admission, as well, to the Bar of Upper Canada - and that without being called upon to pass any examinations.

I had assumed that the office of Honorary Bencher of our Law Society was similar in all respects to that of Honorary Bencher of one of the English Inns of Court. A little over a year ago I had the honour of being elected an Honorary Master of the Bench of Gray's Inn, in London, England. This involved acceptance of the honour, but nothing more. Had I known, at the time I received the Treasurer's invitation that I was also to be admitted to the Bar and that I would be speaking this morning as a Barrister-at-Law, I would certainly have hesitated even longer than I did before undertaking to give my fellow-barristers words of advice and admonition.

I know that my father, though he seldom alluded to it, must have experienced some disappointment at heart when, after I had received degrees in Arts and Law from the University of Toronto, I made known to him my wish to pursue post-graduate studies in political economy and political science, instead of qualifying as a member of the legal profession. I know he had much looked forward to my attending Osgoode Hall, being articled to him through my years as a law student, and, later, being in partnership with him in the practice of Law. Instead, I decided to pursue post-graduate studies at universities in the United States and abroad, with a view to an academic career. My interest, even in early years, was primarily with social problems. My university studies heightened that interest. Had I, at that time, been thinking primarily of a political career, I should certainly have sought to become a barrister. Without starting out to seek either a career in politics or admission to the Bar, I have at last come to possess both, and, as well, the enviable distinction of being an Honorary Benchler of the Law Society of Upper Canada.

Tribute to father's memory

As a tribute to the memory of my father, to what his life has meant to me, and to not a few of the judges and

barristers in our country, I cannot be too grateful to the Benchers of the Law Society of Upper Canada for the honour they have done his son in conferring on him the degree of Barrister-at-Law, and the distinction of Honorary Bencher of the Law Society. I accept the two-fold honour, thus conferred, with feelings of truest pride, but in deep humility. I know that nothing could have afforded my father more in the way of happiness than to have had my name find a place along with his on the long and honourable roll of members of the legal profession of Ontario. I thank the Law Society of Upper Canada for this exceptional tribute to my father's memory.

Long tenure of office as Prime Minister

The other reason mentioned by the Treasurer, for the honour being conferred, was my long tenure of office as Prime Minister.

When I was made an Honorary Bencher of Gray's Inn I was quick to recognize that the honour had come to me through a desire on the part of the legal profession in England to express, in a manner appropriate to the profession, appreciation of the all-important part which Canada, as a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations, has taken in the development of Commonwealth relations, and in the preservation of freedom. Today, I am happy to recognize,

in the honour conferred, a desire on the part of the legal profession of this Province, to accord recognition to the importance of public service in our halls of Parliament, and in the government of our country.

That the Law Society of Upper Canada should have viewed in such a kindly way my many years of office, and deemed me worthy of this expression of their good-will, is something which I cannot too gratefully acknowledge, or for which I cannot thank its members too warmly. It is, indeed, a tribute to our public life that occasions, such as the present, are not infrequently found where the heat of ancient controversies is forgotten, and the sound of faction stilled, in a desire to emphasize the importance of public service. In words I recently used on another memorable occasion, in speaking to ^{my} fellow-members of all parties in Parliament, I venture the hope that the memory of this occasion will serve to lend a glow to public life, and to reveal the richness of the rewards of public service.

Association with the Law and Lawyers

Before I essay the task the Treasurer has assigned me, may I give, if not by way of apology, at

least in explanation, some reasons why I am so bold as to address any words to members of the legal profession.

I have, throughout my life seen a great deal of, and had much to do with lawyers. I cannot speak as a practising lawyer, but I can speak as a member of a practising lawyer's family. There are few associations that I look back upon with greater pride and pleasure than those which my father's library afforded. There, the rows upon rows of law books, with the beautiful coloring of their bindings, seem still to lend a kindly background to one's early life. There, from day to day, conversation was almost certain to touch upon something that had to do with the law, something of ^{court} trials, something of assizes; and, later, much of lectures and examinations at Osgoode Hall. There, too, were friendly meetings with students, with eminent counsel, and with members of the judiciary. In later years, it was a source of particular pleasure to me as I went about in this province and in the provinces of the west, to meet lawyers and judges who had been my father's students here at Osgoode Hall.

Parliament, and more particularly the House of Commons and the Cabinet, provided increased opportunities

for constant and, indeed, a most intimate association with members of the legal profession. All through my political life, I have been accustomed to dealing with lawyers, and I think that I have gained some familiarity with their way of looking at things. In the years I have been leader of my party, I have had as opponents, not a few of the ablest members of the profession in Canada, among the number Sir Robert Borden, The Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen, The Hon. Hugh Guthrie, and Lord Bennett.

May I make this further plea: While I have not engaged in the practice of law, I may claim, I think, at least in the matter of time, to have had more to do with the making of laws in Canada than any other member of the legal profession. I have had, as well, to do with the elevation to the Bench of a goodly number of members of the Bar. It has been my duty, as well, to tender advice on matters of State to no fewer than five of Canada's Governors General.

Nor do I forget, at this moment, and in this company, to recall that the steps by which I gained my early opportunities in public life have their association with three of the most illustrious names in the legal profession, Sir William Mulock, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Sir Allen Aylesworth. It was Sir William Mulock who, in 1900, invited me to enter

There are many things I might say to you this morning. I prefer, instead, to say only one or two things which I pray may, throughout life, be a source of strength to you in the practice of the law, and which, at the close of life, may have helped you to bring honour alike to yourselves and to the profession.

The Influence of Character and Maintenance of Standards

When my father, on account of blindness, was obliged to retire from active connection with the Law School, the Benchers conferred upon him the honour of Lecturer Emeritus. He was presented by the Principal and other Lecturers with an address in which kindly reference was made to the advantage he had taken of the great opportunities, which his long tenure of office had conferred, to influence, by his character, as well as by his teaching, the ethical as well as the legal training of members of the Bar. It is that influence I should like to see made uppermost in each of your lives, the influence of character; the maintenance of high standards of conduct, and of lofty precepts in the practice of your profession.

Believe me, there is no force in the world greater than the force of example. The world has never been more in need than it is today of men who will uphold the Right, and who will battle for Truth and Justice.

Never forget that as Burke has said, "Justice is the common concern of mankind". Increasingly all parts of the world are being drawn together into a single community which is one and indivisible. Your profession makes you special

custodians of the rights of all men, and of Justice in the relationships of Nations as well as of individuals. You have a special mission to do all in your power to see that the rule of Law - based upon Reason, not upon Coercion - is maintained in communities and between nations.

The Importance of Accuracy and Avoidance of Offensive Words

You no doubt are aware that my father wrote a treatise on the Law of Defamation - Libel and Slander. I am told it is still much in demand. I have sometimes thought that he must have foreseen that some member of his family, sooner or later, would be active in politics. Be that as it may, speaking as one who knows something of the effects of political controversy, I would advise all young men whose callings necessitate much of speaking in public, whether in courts of law, in parliament or from the pulpit, to cultivate the habit of accuracy. I would counsel a spirit of tolerance and of moderation and restraint in expression. I would urge one and all to guard as strongly as may be possible against what, in language, may be offensive to others. It is language that provokes controversies, and controversies that beget wars. The radio even more than the press, becomes all too easily an instrument to engender hatred. Fortunately it may also be made a powerful instrument for peace. The habit of accuracy will do much to avoid discord. As Cicero said, the Truth, of itself, easily defends itself.

One's Debt to One's Profession

But it was not for opportunity to express this word of counsel that I made mention of my father's book on the Law of Libel and Slander. It was to bring to your attention a paragraph which appears at the end of its preface. The paragraph reads: "It would be presumption to say that the book is free from errors and imperfections; but for these the writer may fairly claim the indulgence which is generously given to anyone who seeks to repay, however inadequately, the debt which he owes to his own profession."

"Seeks to repay the debt which he owes to his own profession". I like those words. They afford a noble incentive to life and to work. That is what I should like you to keep before you as you advance in your profession, and gain prominence in your careers.

Opportunities the Legal Profession Affords

To be a member of the legal profession is to belong to a highly honourable company, one which, of itself, lends a note of distinction to its every member. The profession of Law opens the door to opportunities of personal advancement, and of public service which few, if any, other callings or professions afford in equal measure. It gives an entry into many homes, and affords a welcome into many lands. To members of the profession and to members of their families, it gives a recognized position in all communities, and to their descendants, if

they are true to its traditions, it bequeathes a worthy name.

How can one seek to repay so great a debt? Again I repeat there is no force like the force of example. Exemplary conduct in all the relationships of life will bring honour to any man; it will also adorn the profession to which he belongs.

Walk Worthy of your Vocation

So, gentlemen, all that I can give you in the way of "Advice and admonition", all that I would wish to give, may be summed up in five words "Walk worthy of your vocation".

If you succeed in that, you need have no fear either for yourself or your profession, and no doubt of the honour you will bring to both.